

Despite another **'DEFAULT'** Congress leaves USPS hanging

In the last days of September—as the federal government's Fiscal Year 2012 drew to a close—many news media outlets reported on the failure of the U.S. Postal Service to make its scheduled Sept. 30 payment of \$5.6 billion toward its congressionally mandated obligation to pre-fund the health benefits of future USPS retirees.

But fortunately for letter carriers, many of these news stories prominently featured statements by NALC President Fredric Rolando that helped clarify for readers, listeners and viewers what the default really was all about. In many cases, the president was the first expert quoted—for example, in a Sept. 27 *Washington Post* column by Joe Davidson.

“In reality, this is a default on the part of Congress.”

—NALC President Fredric Rolando

“In reality, this is a default on the part of Congress, which in 2006 mandated that the Postal Service do something that no other agency or company in the country is required to do—pre-fund future retiree health benefits,” Rolando said within the first paragraphs of Davidson's column. “It is that unique burden that the Postal Service is ‘defaulting’ on—and what's ironic is that the USPS already has \$45 billion set aside for future retiree health benefits, enough to cover all such expenses for several decades, which no other institution can say.” *The Huffington Post* also published a short story about this “default” and provided a link to Davidson's column.

Rolando also was quoted the same day in a story on CNN's website

about the default. “This ‘default’ is not a crisis,” he said. “The payment in question results from an unnecessary congressional mandate.”

An Associated Press story on Sept. 28 included statements by the president as well. “What is needed is for Congress to undo the harm it has done with the pre-funding mandate and for the Postal Service to develop a balanced plan moving forward,” he said, adding that the Postal Service's planned elimination of Saturday mail delivery would particularly hurt rural residents, the elderly and those who depend on the mail for prescription drugs and other goods.

In a Reuters story the same day, Rolando again referred to the “artificial crisis” that Congress has caused, noting how removing the pre-funding obligation “would remove the bulk of the losses as well as the sense of panic.”

Low ‘lame-duck’ expectations

Few in Washington, however, believed that Congress would tackle the Postal Service's financial situation in the so-called “lame duck” session following the Nov. 6 elections, meaning that every postal-focused bill introduced in the current 112th Congress will expire, leaving the USPS hanging until at least Jan. 3.

“With it looking as if Congress would ‘kick the can,’ so to speak, to January,” Rolando said, “we will have our work cut out for us early next year, basically starting all over again, more or less from scratch, to get some form of meaningful postal reform passed.”

This *Postal Record* was prepared in mid-October, so the elections—and their results—were still a few weeks away. “Even so,” Rolando said, “we've seen how tough it's been to get even friends of letter carriers to understand how pre-funding is literally destroying the Postal Service. So come January,

not only are we going to have to work harder than we ever have before to educate both new and returning members about our issues, we're going to have to get much more creative in finding ways to get our elected leaders to pass meaningful reform."

One idea that has gained some traction in recent months is an amendment introduced by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and included as part of the postal reform measure the Senate passed in April. Sanders' idea was to go outside of Congress and to create a "blue-ribbon" commission composed of business leaders as well as legislators who would be tasked with coming up with concrete ideas for USPS to become more businesslike as it adjusts to the changing needs of a 21st century society.

"We believe such a commission could be constructive if all stakeholders—including employees—are represented on it, and also if Congress delays taking any legislative action regarding the Postal Service until after it hears the commission's finding," Rolando said.

In the media

Letter carriers received some high-profile exposure on Sept. 21 when ABC World News Tonight named letter carriers "Persons of the Week" in a segment that focused on this year's NALC Heroes of the Year (see story, page 14). The piece overall got across the message of carriers' value and dedication to the communities we serve.

On Oct. 1, the *Dallas Morning News* published an op-ed piece by President Rolando, where he explained to readers of the country's 11th-largest newspaper how the congressional mandate to pre-fund future retiree health benefits is an unfair burden on the Postal Service's finances.

Rolando's letter to the editor of North-west Connecticut's *Register Citizen* was published Oct. 3. In it, he explained the

real reasons behind the Postal Service's financial problems.

A week later, *The New York Times* ran a letter from Rolando that responded to both an Oct. 2 news story and a Sept. 28 editorial. The president stated that the Senate's postal reform measure, S. 1789, is deeply flawed, and that Congress needs to focus on repealing the unfair pre-funding mandate.

And on Sunday, Oct. 14, in the president's letter to the editor of *The Free Press* in Kinston, NC, he corrected a couple of items in the newspaper's earlier editorial and explained the Postal Service's financial situation.

Other national officers, as well as rank-and-file letter carriers, found some traction in the press as well. On Sept. 13, Region 3 National Business Agent Neal Tisdale discussed the Postal Service's financial situation with Charles Showalter, host of the Working Family Radio Network program "The Union Edge." The same day, Alton, IL Branch 309 President Joe Mercurio's letter to the editor of *The Telegraph* explained to readers the real reasons behind the Postal Service's financial problems.

On Sept. 25, three members of Red Wing, MN Branch 401—Dennis Bluhm, steward Bruce Brage and President Dewey Christianson—had their letter to the editor printed in *The Republican Eagle*. A few days later, Naples, FL Branch 4716 carriers were featured in a Sept. 28 story in the Fort Myers *News-Press* about union activism in the 2012 election campaigns. The same week, Salt Lake City Br. 111 activist Chad Mortensen was a guest on Family Radio's "On The Record" program. The show is broadcast on radio stations in Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and Washington state.

Meanwhile, Michigan State Sen. Bert Johnson, who represents suburban Detroit, wrote an opinion piece on Oct. 10 in the *Detroit Free Press* that called on Congress to protect the USPS. ✉

New York magazine abandons USPS

As yet another piece of evidence that the Postal Service's plan to cut service to save some money is misguided, *New York* magazine announced in early October that it was going to experiment with door-to-door delivery by hand to doorman buildings and commercial addresses in Manhattan.

A letter to some subscribers said that hand delivery "gives us experience in this arena, in preparation for future USPS changes that may be more onerous."

"This is a crystal-clear demonstration of how the USPS plan to cut a day of delivery is working against us right now—in fact, it's pushing business out of the Postal Service," NALC President Fredric Rolando said.

Once the rollout is complete, *New York* will be hand delivered to nearly 60,000 Manhattan addresses—about 60 percent of the magazine's Manhattan subscription list.

